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Rumor Almost Ruins Small Soda Firm : Race relations: A flyer in Harlem said Tropical Fantasy was part of a Ku Klux Klan scheme to 'make you sterile.' The firm fought back with the truth--and won back most of its customers.

July 14, 1991 | ARLENE LEVINSON | ASSOCIATED PRESS

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NEW YORK — The rumor made sense to Early May, and she was alarmed. It was that inexpensive soda pop, a flyer posted in her apartment building said, the kind her daughter liked to buy.

For weeks, the story burned through Harlem like wildfire: Low-priced brands of soda called Tropical Fantasy, A-Treat and Top Pop were made by the Ku Klux Klan with an ingredient to sterilize black men.

"My daughter used to buy those sodas and I told her: 'Don't buy them no more,' " said Early May, 62, who refused to give her last name. "I came from Alabama. That's why I believe it."

A block away down Malcolm X Boulevard, 17-year-old Tosh Williams repeated the rumor as he stood outside one of many small groceries dotting the Harlem neighborhood that makes up Tropical Fantasy's hottest market.

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"I heard people talking about it, and I went into a store and saw the sign," Williams said. "It's cheap soda that makes you sterile." If anyone buys it now, he said, "they're fools."

This is a story about a rumor--how it nearly soured the success of a little soda company and how the company fought back and won. It's also about being black in America.

It begins in Brooklyn.

Brooklyn Bottling Co. was limping into bankruptcy in the mid-1980s, barely surviving on sales of seltzer, when Eric Miller inherited the firm his grandfather founded in 1937.

The 33-year-old scion of bottlers revived the family business with shrewd marketing. He brought back the old line of fruit-flavored sodas, added a few more and changed the name from Crown and Glory to Tropical Fantasy. His strategy was to keep the price down, way below big-name competition like Pepsi and Coke.

Tropical Fantasy sold well in corner groceries from Boston to North Carolina, but Miller couldn't control the counter price. Soda was soda to shopkeepers, who charged up to 85 cents for what Miller intended to be a bargain. He solved the problem by printing the 49-cent price on the bottle cap. While he was at it, he increased the bottle size from 12 ounces to 20. The new packaging made its debut Sept. 30, 1990. It was a smash.

"It just started selling, selling, selling," Miller said of those heady days.

Sales rose 50% in 1990, to \$12 million. Miller projected sales of \$15 million this year. Optimism lasted seven good months. But then the rumor struck.

By all accounts, it began in April. At least that's when the first flyer was seen. It was April 3, to be exact, in Harlem.

Mel Johnson remembers the day. His company, WAM Beverage Distributors, owns half the fleet of 25 trucks that distribute Tropical Fantasy.

The anonymous handbills were crudely printed. The grammar was flawed. They got the KKK's full name wrong.

"ATTENTION!!! ATTENTION!!! ATTENTION!!!" each handbill read. "Please be advise, Top Pop, and Tropical Fantasy, also Treat .50 sodas are being manufactured by the Klu Klux Klan. Sodas contain stimulants to sterilize the black man, and who knows what else!!!!

"You have been warned," it concluded. "Please save the children."

Three days later, the same flyer turned up in Brooklyn.

"Overnight, the thing mushroomed to no end," Johnson said. "Outside school buildings and churches, we seen kids on the street, giving out these flyers." The youngsters, when asked, said some guy paid them \$5. What guy? They couldn't say.

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The rumor flew and spread and stuck wherever it went. It galloped over the Brooklyn Bridge to East New York, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Coney Island. "One of my drivers went into the Coney Island section," Johnson said. "A group of kids started throwing bottles at the truck yelling: 'Get out of here! You sterilize blacks!'" "

It fanned out into Queens. It leaped westward over the Hudson River into New Jersey where Mary Truesdale, in Englewood, heard her nephew say a couple of his friends weren't drinking the stuff.

Truesdale came across an article in the newspaper debunking the rumor and gave it to her 7-year-old son, Brian, to take to school, where the teacher discussed it with the class. "The teacher thanked me. The students were interested, especially West Indian kids who have relatives in the city who had heard about it," Truesdale said.

And still the rumor passed from friend to friend, from child to parent.

Rosemarie Mulero looks after truants at a school in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant section. She's also the wife of a Brooklyn Bottling truck driver. One day in the school staff lounge, she overheard one black teacher warn another not to drink Tropical Fantasy.

Another day, as Mulero was about to drink from a bottle of the soda, a girl about 14 years old walked into her office. "She said, 'Mrs. Mulero, don't drink that soda,' and I said, 'Why?' and she said, 'You're going to get sterile.' She said she saw it on the news."

About 20 inquiries came in to the Food and Drug Administration, FDA spokesman Herman Janiger said. "We didn't believe it, but we decided to investigate," he said.

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